

NEW PUBLICATIONS.

METHODIST POLITY.

PEOPLE AND PRACTICES IN THE METHODIST CHURCH. BY A LYMAN. 16mo., pp. 311. J. E. Lippincott Company.

The author of this book, Colonel John A. Wright, of Philadelphia, believes that the time has come for a very extensive change in the organization and government of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In brief, the reform which he wishes to establish is the increased representation of the laity in the conferences; but his book will attract attention less for any novelty in his main proposal, which is familiar enough, than for the radically democratic spirit in which it is sustained. He bases his claim for equal, if not proportionate, representation upon the contention that the system of government by the clergy is a despotism set up by priestly arrogance. Christ gave no power of government either to his apostles or his disciples; they were only called to preach; and the assumption of a divine right given to the ministry to rule and command the church is as full of danger as the assumption of a divine right to govern nations by kingly power. The Methodist Episcopal Church is at present tyrannized over by a usurping clergy, and the privilege of self-government now demanded for the laity is only a demand for their natural and inalienable rights. Their forbearance and patience have been sadly tried; but the day of deliverance will come. In the development of these arguments and opinions, Colonel Wright displays a polemical zeal which sometimes carries him pretty far. He denounces the position of ministers to lay equality in no measured terms; and he could not treat the General Conference with less respect than if it were run like a Tammany Convention. But in pointing out what he sincerely holds to be dangerous and weak places in the church, he only follows his convictions of duty; and he bears testimony, on proper occasions, to the earnest piety of the great majority of the ministers whose policies he cannot approve.

In reviewing the results of ministerial government he uses some severe language. He finds in proceedings of the General Conference plain evidences of selfish ambition, place-hunting, bargaining for office, secret combinations, and the manipulation of votes, especially the votes of colored members. These are not supposed to be exactly clerical practices, but Colonel Wright ascribes them to the complete preponderance of the clerical element, and maintains that the right way to purify the conference is by a large infusion of laymen.

The laity, he urges, should also be admitted to the Annual Conferences—a more radical change than the increase of their representation in the General Conference, for at present they have no part at all in the Annual Conferences. The argument for the innovation is carefully presented; but in fact the democratic theory of the book, that the "body of believers" stand on an absolute equality, and that the practice of setting apart the ministry as a higher authority or a distinct order, is a dangerous approach to Roman principles, seems to cover everything. The author devotes a chapter to the charitable funds and publishing interests of the church, where he holds that clerical usurpation has wrought mischief, although he is more concerned by dangerous tendencies observable in these departments than by any great wrongs actually accomplished.

A chapter on the evil results to the ministry itself from the formation of a ministerial class will be read with especial interest. The temptation to use their real or supposed influence, in secular politics, is set before the preachers of this large and powerful denomination by party leaders, and the church little suspects how many of them yield to it. The temptation to abandon the legitimate work of the ministry for editorships, secretarieships, and other more or less worldly employments under church pay, is always present to the men composing the conferences which have the appointment to such positions. "For some years past the seemingly greatest source of interest in the meeting of a general conference has not been what could be done to advance through the church the cause of the master, but who should have the offices... In the General Conference of 1884, 219 of the 265 ministerial delegates received votes for some official position, and 370 names were used for the 166 official positions and honorary appointments." Positions in the gift of the General Conference are rarely conferred upon any except its own members. The smaller places connected with the Annual Conferences are equally sought after by the members of those bodies. But Colonel Wright recognizes the fact that the tendency to secularization of the ministry is by no means an evil special to the Methodist church. It has its roots in universal human nature, and the temptation is common to all Protestant churches in all lands. Another temptation to the ministry is to be found in the attempt to secure certain aims by concert of action as a class. A combination to build up a ministerial hierarchy has been at work for some years. "To exclude the laity from any further representation in the councils of the church is the first verse of this new testament; to attack the bishops' power, and to place a limit on the length of their service, is the second; to build up the annual conference as a recognized power with certain legislative and administrative rights is the third." This matter is treated at length and with considerable force.

Finally Colao Wright summarizes his proposals under the following heads: 1. Equal representation and equal powers of the ministry and the laity in the General and Annual Conferences. 2. The representation of the itinerant ministry in the General Conference to be confined to the effective itinerant men. 3. The clerical membership in an Annual Conference to be limited to the effective travelling ministry. 4. Ministers to be protected from temptations to give up the active ministry or enter upon secular pursuits. To these prime proposals he adds various suggestions more or less directly connected with them—such as an equal representation of ministry and laity in the management of the church boards and charitable societies; the control of the publishing interests by a committee composed of three-fourths laymen and one-fourth ministers; and the setting apart of the colored members in an organization of their own—which will be better for them and very much better for their white brethren.

It is probable that the question of lay-representation will be discussed with some energy in the next General Conference, to be held in 1888, and the present publication is important as an early formulation of the wishes of the most radical advocates of change. The discussion has gone on long enough already to gather heat, and it will gather more before it comes to a settlement. The acrimonious tone of some of Colonel Wright's remarks, however unfortunate we may think it is, is unnatural. But members of the church may take comfort in the reflection that if the evils which this aggressive reformer dreads had made any serious inroads upon the spirituality of the Methodist clergy, the astonishing vigor which distinguishes Methodism in every corner of the country would certainly not have survived.

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